

Mutual

A WORD PICTURE  
OF THE NEW W-G-N  
RADIO, BUILDING  
AND STUDIOS

by

JAMES O'DONNELL BENNETT

Call 70

--615--  
/

*This is a reprint of an article which  
appeared in the Chicago Sunday  
Tribune, September 22, 1935*

# A WORD PICTURE OF THE NEW W-G-N RADIO BUILDING AND STUDIOS

*by James O'Donnell Bennett*

Enter fairyland.

Enter it any time from 10 o'clock this morning till 2 this afternoon for the public preview that marks completion of one of the most intricate and exacting achievements during the last decade of American architecture and engineering.

The Tribune's new radio building, just north of Tribune Tower, is finished after 276 days of intensive toil by 550 engineers, artists, and artisans, and after the expenditure of half a million dollars.

In writing about radio one does not say that anything is "the last word in radio," but this newspaper does sincerely believe that its Gothic radio structure and equipment are the up-to-the-minute words in radio and that they will reward inspection by you.

*Admission by Ticket*

The preview—accompanied by music, and admit-

tance to which will be by ticket applied for in advance—will be repeated tomorrow and on Tuesday and Wednesday from 10 o'clock in the morning till 2 in the afternoon.

And so again we invite our friends to view fairyland.

A fairyland of music, of discourse, and of color; a laboratory of miraculous-seeming inventions, devices, contrivances, and gadgets that utter radio's up-to-the-minute message. (And if that sounds like o'er zealous ballyhoo it is nevertheless the exact truth.)

Here, in a luxurious but restful studio auditorium seating 588 persons, the public will see the wheels of radio go round through the medium of what are called "visible shows."

#### *Hear and See Performers*

Notables of radio will not only be heard but seen on a platform so large that it will accommodate an orchestra the size of the Chicago Symphony.

All these platform programs will be carried by huge concealed amplifiers and transmitters to the outside world—into, in other words, your home wherever in the United States you dwell.

In addition to the main studio—or "public observation room," as it also is called—there are in this radio palace of Bedford stone two more studios that are open to the public when it wishes to enjoy an especially



*The exterior of W-G-N's new half million dollar radio studio building adjoining Tribune Tower on Michigan avenue, Chicago. The building is in Gothic architecture to conform with the style of Tribune Tower and is constructed of Indiana limestone.*

intimate experience in seeing and hearing radio's wheels go round. One of them seats 22 persons, the other 18. Thus we have for our guests a total seating capacity of 628.

#### *Shows Will Be Free*

Always these "visible shows" will be free from the time you step in from Michigan avenue—no admission fee and no tipping at the receiving windows of the spacious checkroom. Ten uniformed ushers and pages in dark blue coats with silver buttons and powder blue trousers will look after your comfort. The 25 members of the principal orchestra will wear uniforms of white and black.

In short, fairyland run like a well-ordered club.

You will hardly believe how large a staff is busy in the graystone palace that covers one-fourth of a city block. Counting everybody—directors, artists, production men, operators, electricians, carpenters, firemen, guards, ushers, and reception girls—from 150 to 200 persons will be on duty when the plant is going full tilt in its total of three public and three private studios. And in addition to those six, W-G-N will continue to maintain its three studios now housed on the eleventh floor of Tribune Tower.

#### *Gift to Readers and Listeners*

About that matter of free admission—it will be free to

the last penny. It will be by ticket, and after application for them the tickets will be mailed free of charge to your home. Details about that further on in this article. Suffice to say at the moment that W-G-N's new radio home will also be the people's radio home and always free to the people—The Tribune's gift to its readers and listeners.

When you take your preview this week—the first of what we hope will be many visits—a dozen phrases of description will come to your lips.

Especially will the lighting bewitch you.

For in this cathedral of radio the lights become a varied scheme of decoration, subtle, fluent, elusive, and providing not only illumination but also a kind of curtain for the "visible shows" or "audience performances."

#### *Jewel Box of Color*

Now it is as soft as flute music, now as strong and bold as the grand diapason of an organ.

'Tis a palette of light, you will say; a jewel box of color.

Rainbows while you wait! When the full glow is on, you will think of the large "public observation hall" in your radio home as the sunshine chamber and, leaning back in your deeply upholstered chair—which is much wider than the ordinary run of auditorium seats—you

will be pretty content with the picture. For the place is not fussed up with decoration. In the simplicity of the lines it is in a good modernistic style—reticent but neither austere or angular.

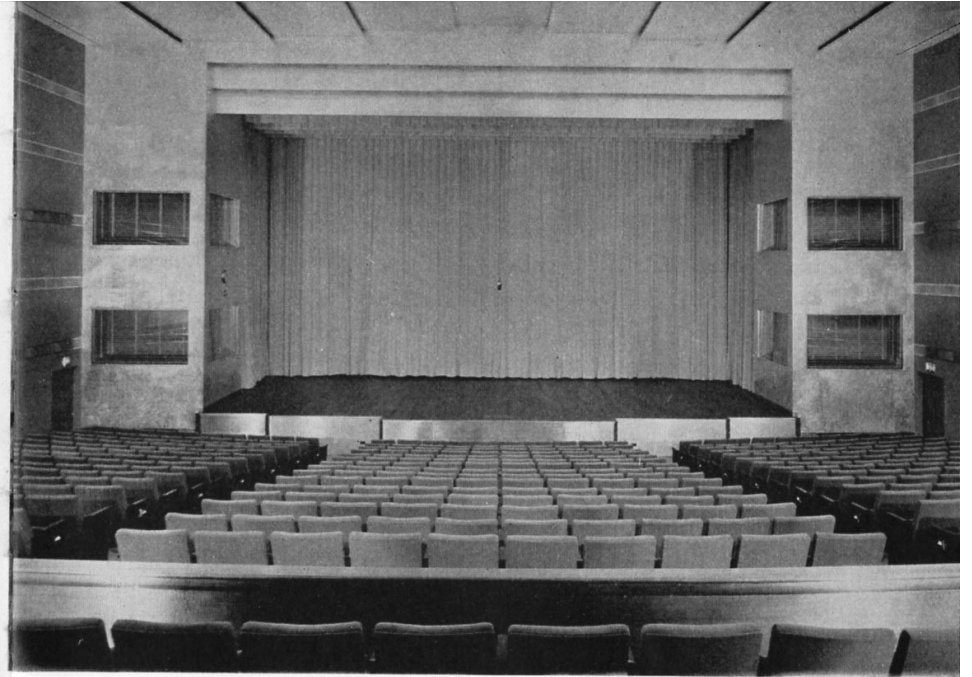
Built like a jewel box—inlaid woods, gleaming metal, and rich tapestries—though the interior is, it is also as strong and as intricate as a battleship. At first glance you find chamber after chamber, lobby after lobby, corridor after corridor as simple as a modernistic drawing room but, when the lights go on, as beautiful as a garden in full bloom.

*Place Pulsing with Dynamos*

And the more you prowl around the more you get the feel of a vast machine shop—a place pulsing with dynamos and whispering with delicate mechanisms.

Those last were the things that astounded me and laid humility upon me. I could not always understand them, but I could appreciate the effects they created and could see that they must have cost a heap of money.

Before taking two afternoons to go over the plant I did not see how half a million dollars could be spent on four floors of radio and I suspected that my shopmates were drawing a long bow when they declared that such was the price of perfection. To talk of the cost of a great project may be vulgar, but it is news, and the news here is that not only has the sum of half a million



*Studio number 1, the main broadcasting auditorium of the new W-G-N building, seating 588 people and as Mr. Bennett says "a jewel box of color." The seats are Morocco red, the walls powder blue with bands of light, the butments at the sides of the platform which house the control rooms for the radio pickup and lighting equipment and two private observation booths, and the ceiling are in silverleaf. The platform floor is in black and the back drop of eggshell white velvet. The carpeting is mouse grey color and the fittings are chromium and in modern style.*

dollars gone into W-G-N's temple but that the total will run to nearly \$600,000.

*A Laboratory, a Studio*

The result is a laboratory of observation for scientists, a seat of instruction and entertainment for the people, and a dramatized newspaper.

In this setting you shall hear the voices of kings and comedians, presidents and prelates, industrial magnates and men of letters, scientists and pugilists, singers and explorers. And all of those you shall from time to time see in person when they mount the platform for one of the visible shows—all except the kings, they not traveling much nowadays lest their thrones slip from under them.

The structure is from designs by John Mead Howells—son of that great limner of American life, William Dean Howells—and the lamented Raymond Hood, architects of Tribune Tower, and by their associates, J. Andre Fouilhoux and Leo Weissenborn. It is a cascade of "frozen music" which, 'tis said, is what great Gothic architecture should be, and the cloister connecting it with the tower is charming.

*Brings History to People*

The exterior instantly stirs the imagination because a building which, by its comprehensiveness and its ingenuity, makes history in a new science and a new art

also utters in stone a story of the ages. This is the result of our chief's ardor in bringing momentous history intimately home to the people, especially to children. Embedded in the limestone of the building are stones and a bronze that voice architectural and national annals of 5,600 years. Here is a big block from the Great Pyramid of the year 3700 B. C. And yonder a bronze panel from the "Holy Door"—A. D. 1900—of St. Peter's Rome, with the papal arms and the date engraved upon it. And there a stone from the Roman Colosseum, A. D. 87, and another from the Great Wall of China.

*Stones from Famed Places*

And so on down the ages—stones from the Stabian baths in Pompeii, from the cave of the Sibyl at Cumæ whom "the pious Æneas" consulted before his descent into Hades, from Rouen cathedral, A. D. 1220, from St. Peter's at Rome, from the Clementine hall in the pope's palace, from the Tainitzkaya tower of the Kremlin, from the battlefield of Bunker Hill, from Fort Sumter, against which the first shot of the civil war was fired, seashells embedded in the fragment; from Douglas Hall—1856—of the old University of Chicago, and from our great World's Fair of 1893.

That vivid way of touching history to life was first tried on the walls of Tribune Tower and it has been

a success. Passersby, young and old, pause for minutes to study the silent but not voiceless relics.

The instant you step from the avenue into W-G-N's fairyland, silence is laid upon you like a cool cloth. Everything every step of the way is soundproof. Every door is felted and every door air controlled. They close with a soft whisper.

Corridors are noiseless to the footfall.

Those corridors lead to rest rooms and smoking rooms for artists and visitors, to clients' rooms and executives' offices, to a chamber for organ recitals, to music archives containing thousands of compositions, and to air conditioning lofts.

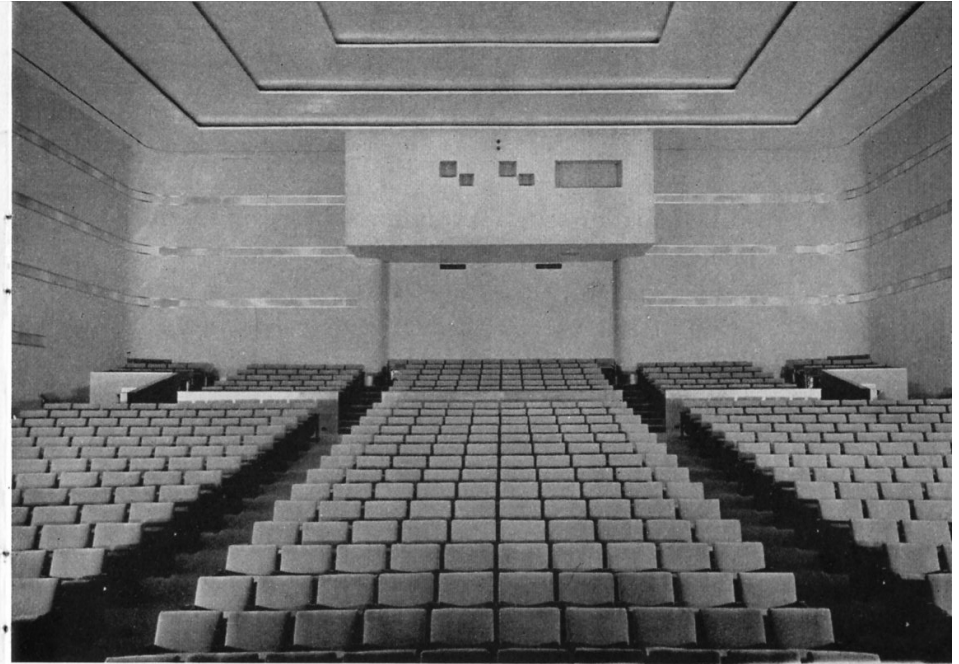
Endless devices!

At the touch of a button, grand pianos noiselessly disappear from the main platform.

Synchronized clocks, some of them costing as much as \$100 each, all over the place so that a performer shall know every minute what time it is. For in radio there is no such thing as "holding the show."

#### *Special Bricks of Glass*

Note the large glass window in the south wall of the "business lobby"—as distinguished from the main studio auditorium lobby—which opens off the lovely connecting cloister. That window is set with a novel composition called brick glass. Every brick is four inches



*Looking toward the rear of Studio 1, the large auditorium which will seat 588 spectators, one sees the motion picture projection booth which houses two of the most modern motion picture projection outfits and in addition several spotlights which will be used to set out the artists during broadcasts. This booth is directly in the center of the auditorium and from it the entire lighting control of the house can be operated.*

thick and contains a vacuum, thus keeping heat out in summer and heat in in winter. New machinery had to be built for the fabrication of the special types of brick we ordered. It admits light beautifully, but is not transparent.

See that drapery of eggshell white velvet that hangs behind the platform of the main auditorium. It is 48 feet 4 inches wide and 29 feet high. It can silently move forward like a white cloud, thus cutting the depth of the stage in half and permitting a more intimate show. Touching a button makes it move.

*Rainbow Lighting Effect*

Look aloft to the silver ceiling of the principal auditorium—the room that will be thrown open to The Tribune's guests this morning—and there you will see a ponderous panel that moves noiselessly to reveal a battery of ten spotlights, each light equipped with a wheel containing five colors that descend upon the exhibition platform like a Niagara of rainbows.

W-G-N's new station can take parts of its shows from eight different microphones controlled individually or by one master control. This is the largest installation of the kind that our people know of.

From the master control room on the station's second floor, W-G-N has wires running to the Chicago Board of Trade, the Drake, the Blackstone, the Aragon and

Trianon ballrooms, and the Palmer house which are called "remote control points." These wires are leased from the telephone company by the month at so much a mile, and are bound in one telephone cable capable of giving us a hundred pairs of circuits. Their purpose is to bring in programs that originate outside W-G-N's studios. There are also emergency cables to be used in case of floods or a street accident.

The builders took measures to meet the demands of every emergency.

By a system of dialed electrical boxes, so small that your hat would hold one, Tribune executives and clients can dial from offices in Tribune Tower into the main control room of the station and instantly hear any one of eight programs of our own or other stations.

All this was—to me—terribly intricate, and listening to it I went kind of silly in the head. "Look," said one of the eager explainers, "where at home you have to go over and turn your dial to control your volume, in this new W-G-N layout it is done by pressing a button—a device of which the principle has been used for two years, but never before so successfully. See what I mean?"

"Yes, indeed," said I with the polite mendacity we dumb laymen display when a technical enthusiast speaks.



### *Latest in Sound Insulation*

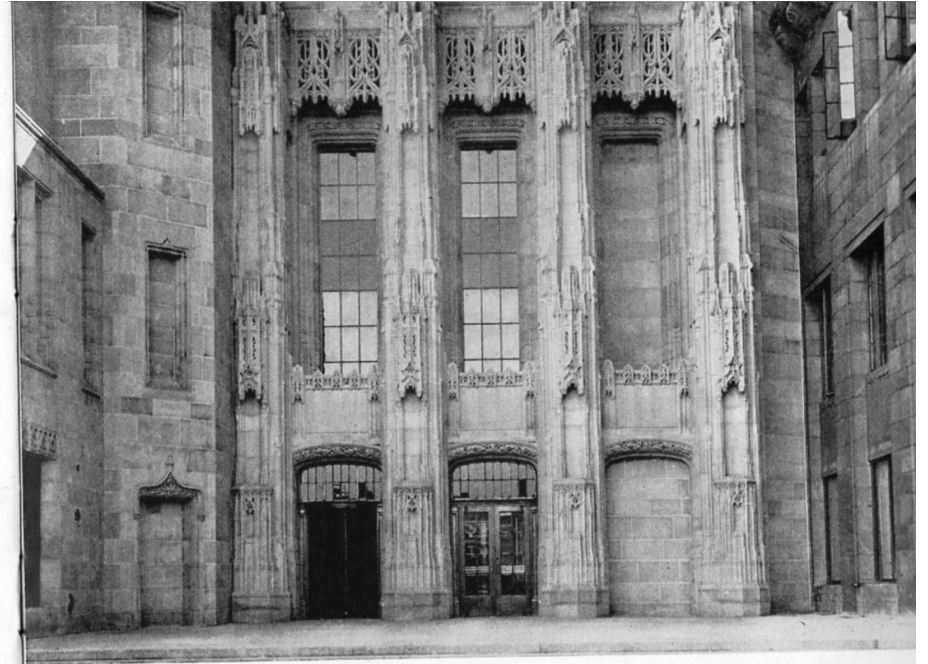
The latest sound insulation devices such as transite, which is a composition of asbestos and cement, and rockoustile, which comprises cork, mica, and cement, and others so new that their names are not yet in the dictionaries, were explained to me as they may be to you. But all that, like the telephonic devices and the air cooling devices, was such highly specialized stuff that my principal interest in it was in observing the rapturous reaction of the staf to it.

In other words, my interest was in the men and women of the staf, on both its technical and its art sides. They are alert. They speak many words, but short ones, and they release them rapidly. They are working in a new world and they face some fresh problem, some glad, unexpected opportunity every day.

That impressed me deeply.

### *Staf Keeps on Tiptoe*

The readiness, the certitude, and the opulence with which Americans rise to the demands and develop the potentialities of a new invention are truly astounding. This staf is on tiptoe eight hours a day, expectant, eager, prompt. Some of the younglings of American and English stations sometimes incline to the slapdash and take the marvels amid which and with which they are working with an almost ribald matter-of-fact-



*The entrance to the new W-G-N building for all studios exclusive of the main auditorium. The four graceful columns which stand at the back of the courtyard between the studio building and Tribune Tower rise four stories high and are hewn from Indiana limestone. The columns and other decorative designs were hand carved from solid blocks of stone which were erected during the process of building. Directly inside the two revolving doors is the main lobby of the studio building, a chamber so harmonious in proportions and decoration as to well repay special study by architects.*

ness. A workman, it seems to me, ought to revere his tools—especially such miraculous tools as have been vouchsafed this generation. The first message sent over the magnetic telegraph—“What God hath wrought”—sounded the right note.

Such a feeling, such honest piety in utilizing the mighty discoveries of science and invention would do much to better the quality of all radio programs. The medium is so great, so wonderful as to seem heaven sent. The product is too often middling.

#### *Chronology of Building*

Let us drop technicalities and description for the moment and do a bit of chronology on this marvelous building that has been completed in 13 months plus a week.

The story reads thus:

*August 15, 1934*—Subterranean work amid foundations that were—with an eye to the future—laid a decade ago, begins. It is not visible to passersby in Tribune Square. To follow will be 276 actual working days of 8 hours each—5 days a week—and each day, almost every hour indeed, will be fraught with new and delicate problems in engineering, in architecture, and in decoration.

*Aug. 19*—First public announcement of the project, the news being that The Tribune is receiving the steel

for a half million dollar broadcasting building for W-G-N, to be erected just north of Tribune Tower. Announcement made under the anti-depression slogan, “The way to help business is to keep busy.”

*Aug. 23*—Dozens of workmen, happy to be busy again, start the outdoor preliminaries to construction.

*Sept. 24*—Huge derrick for swinging steel girders into place is set up. The sight puts new heart into the throng of onlookers in Tribune Square.

*Oct. 11*—Cement mixers, masons and steel workers are on the job.

*Nov. 9*—Foundations are being “squared off” with Polaris, the north star, as a sighting point—this to insure accurate building lines. First use of the expedient on a Chicago commercial structure.

*Nov. 19*—First steel column is swung into position and riveted to the foundation. Thus actual above-ground construction starts.

#### *Competition for Designs*

*Nov. 24*—In a nation-wide \$5,000 competition for designs for the decoration of the main audience chamber seating 588 persons, Ernest A. Grunsfeld, Jr., Chicago, who designed the great Adler Planetarium, on the lake front, wins first prize, \$2,500. Nearly 200 designs are submitted and prizes and honorable mentions are won by 34 competitors.

*Jan. 3, 1935*—Topmost girder is riveted into place and, in accordance with the ancient custom of builders' guilds, the workmen fly the flag of their country from the structure's peak.

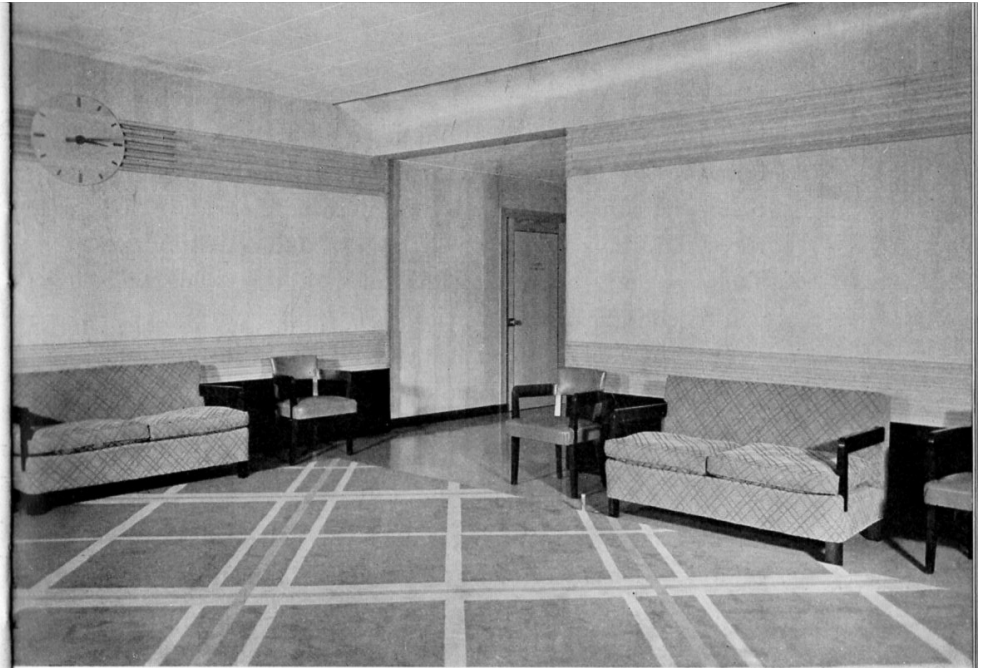
*April 1*—The delicate interior work of this temple of science and invention begins.

*May 29*—Count Mazzaglia Cutelli, internationally famous synchronist, completes the station's sound effects department, most of the devices originating with him, but several being imported from Germany and one from Luxor, Egypt. The quaint devices reproduce every sound from the chirp of a cricket and the sizzling of bacon to the roar and throb of a cannonade.

*Doors Open Today*

*July 18*—Beginning of the end in sight and the 550 workmen and their wives receive invitations, exclusively for them, to be The Tribune's guests at the first dedication broadcasting performances on Oct. 1 and 2. "The men have richly earned this acknowledgment of W-G-N's gratitude," says The Tribune's editor, Robert R. McCormick, adding, "Their spirit has been fine, and their work has shown their appreciation of the idea behind the building. They have put their hearts into a difficult and exacting job and the first audience shows will be dedicated to them."

*This morning!*—Structure finished, and its doors will



*The beautiful wood paneled main lobby of the building—the reception room to the studios, artists' rooms and the control rooms of the new broadcasting unit.*

be thrown open to the public from 10 a. m. to 2 p. m. for a preview of Ernest A. Grunsfeld Jr.'s prize-winning main audience studio in silver, powder blue and Morocco red. This preview will be repeated on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday evenings of this week and will be enlivened with music.

The story of the call letters W-G-N is interesting.

Those letters came from The Tribune's slogan, "The World's Greatest Newspaper," and the W-G-N call initials were acquired from Mr. Carl D. Bradley, who was operating a coal carrier, named for him, on the Great Lakes. In March of 1924 the call letters were established as those of The Tribune's radio station and the opening of The Tribune's station on the Edgewater Beach hotel—old station WEBH—came on March 29, 1924, with the new call letters W-G-N going out to the world for the first time from an entertainment radio station.

The ship owner relinquished the letters as a courtesy and without argument, as the ship was not in service at the time of the transfer of letters, but was wintering at a Michigan port.

#### *Tribune's First Broadcasting*

The Tribune has been vitally interested in radio broadcasting almost from the inception of that art. As long ago as December, 1921, negotiations were begun be-

tween KYW, the first Chicago broadcasting station, and The Tribune with reference to The Tribune's entrance into radio broadcasting. These negotiations with KYW culminated in January, 1922, with the inauguration of regular programs of current events, stock market reports, and sports summaries, which were furnished by The Tribune and broadcast over KYW as Tribune-Westinghouse programs. Due, however, to dissatisfaction on the part of The Tribune over the territory covered by KYW, this arrangement was discontinued.

#### *Call Letters Changed*

The genealogy of W-G-N extends back to May 19, 1922. On that date station WDAP, then owned by the Midwest Radio Central, Inc., was first licensed by the secretary of commerce to operate with the most power then allowed, 1,000 watts. A year later WDAP was purchased by the Chicago Board of Trade and subsequently by the Whitestone company, owner of the Drake hotel, Chicago, on top of which the station was located. From the Whitestone company The Tribune acquired WDAP in 1924, when the call letters were changed to W-G-N.

The license issued by the secretary of commerce to The Tribune on July 15, 1924, changed the call letters of station WDAP to W-G-N and authorized the use of

1,000 watts of power. The Tribune operated station W-G-N on the Drake hotel under this lease until Jan. 11, 1929, at which time it purchased the apparatus and equipment.

#### *Two Stations Purchased*

On Oct. 2, 1925, The Tribune and its subsidiary, Liberty Weekly, Inc., purchased from Charles A. Erbstein two broadcasting stations, WTAS and WCEE, both located near Elgin, Ill. WTAS at that time operated with 2,500 watts power and WCEE with 500 watts. The call letters were changed from WTAS to WLIB on the one station, and W-G-N and WLIB alternated on the same broadcast channel, 990 kilocycles, until in 1927 they were shifted to the clear channel of 980 kilocycles and five months later to the cleared channel of 720 kilocycles upon which W-G-N is still operating.

On Oct. 2, 1926, a new transmitter using a power of 10,000 watts was placed in service. On Nov. 3, 1928, W-G-N commenced using 25,000 watts of power. The consolidation of the three stations, W-G-N, WLIB, and WTAS, into the one station, W-G-N, was accomplished on Sept. 26, 1928.

On Oct. 16, 1928, the federal radio commission issued a license to the consolidated stations under the call letters of W-G-N, authorizing the use of full time on the channel 720 kilocycles.

On March 29, 1934, the new 50,000 watt transmitter of W-G-N was put in service with a gala two-hour program for the public in the grand ballroom of the Drake. The celebration continued for another three hours via remote control programs.

In fine, W-G-N has acquired all its wave lengths by purchase and not by favor or influence. It wears no governmental collar.

A feature of the new home of W-G-N which will interest our visitors from the art world is the mural adornment of the four main studios. Each one of them was decorated from prize-winning designs in the \$5,000 nation-wide competition. Hence their variety, their arresting originality, and their racily native spirit.

#### *Free to Public Every Night*

The first public performance in the cathedral of radio will be given on Thursday evening, Oct. 3, and special performances sponsored by The Tribune will continue till Sunday evening, Oct. 6.

After that the regular order of broadcasting will be offered, with a free "visible show" every night, to which the public is invited.

On Sunday afternoons carefully selected church choirs representing every denomination in Chicago will give free audience performances in the main studio seating nearly 600 persons.

Admission to all public performances will be by free tickets to be applied for by letter addressed to "Station W-G-N, Chicago" or by card application, the card to be filled out at The Tribune Public Service office, 1 South Dearborn street, or in the lobby of Tribune Tower on Tribune Square.

Tickets will then be mailed without charge to the applicants.